[1] Introduction

161 According to the census referred to hereafter, the Bambara number more than 500,000, thus forming one of the largest population groups in West Africa.

184 This group is not homogeneous; however, in addition to its language, which is in fact its characteristic element, it does have certain basic customs common - at least in a general way - to all its members. It is possible to observe this common heritage by [121] studying one section of the group, and such is the purpose of this work.

121 The Bambara of Ségou and Kaarta, who concern us here, have the distinction over their congeners of having evolved well-
127 known empires. To the history of these empires, already known through the research of my predecessors, I shall add new documentation, based primarily on an unpublished chronicle of the empire of Ségou. This chronicle is interesting, among other reasons, because it is entirely the work of one of the traditionists whose erudition, as reliable and exact as possible within the limitations of native competence, merits our serious attention. Indeed, my book is simply a detailed commentary on this chronicle, buttressed by knowledge acquired on the spot during the course of my administrative duties and by information obtained from the works listed in the bibliography.

121 It should be noted that, though these documents and this store of knowledge make it easy enough to describe the customs if one limits oneself to generalities, it is on the other hand a difficult and delicate task to define the customs as they are applied to given social manifestations and to try to deduce the principles underlying these manifestations.

This is all the more true in that experience acquired elsewhere [2] is often, instead of a help, a reef which is as perilous as it is appealing. So it is that one is naturally tempted to apply to native institutions the nomenclature and the fundamental characteristics of institutions - especially European ones - which are assumed to be comparable. When origins and development are thus transferred to a foreign context, native custom is deformed. It can